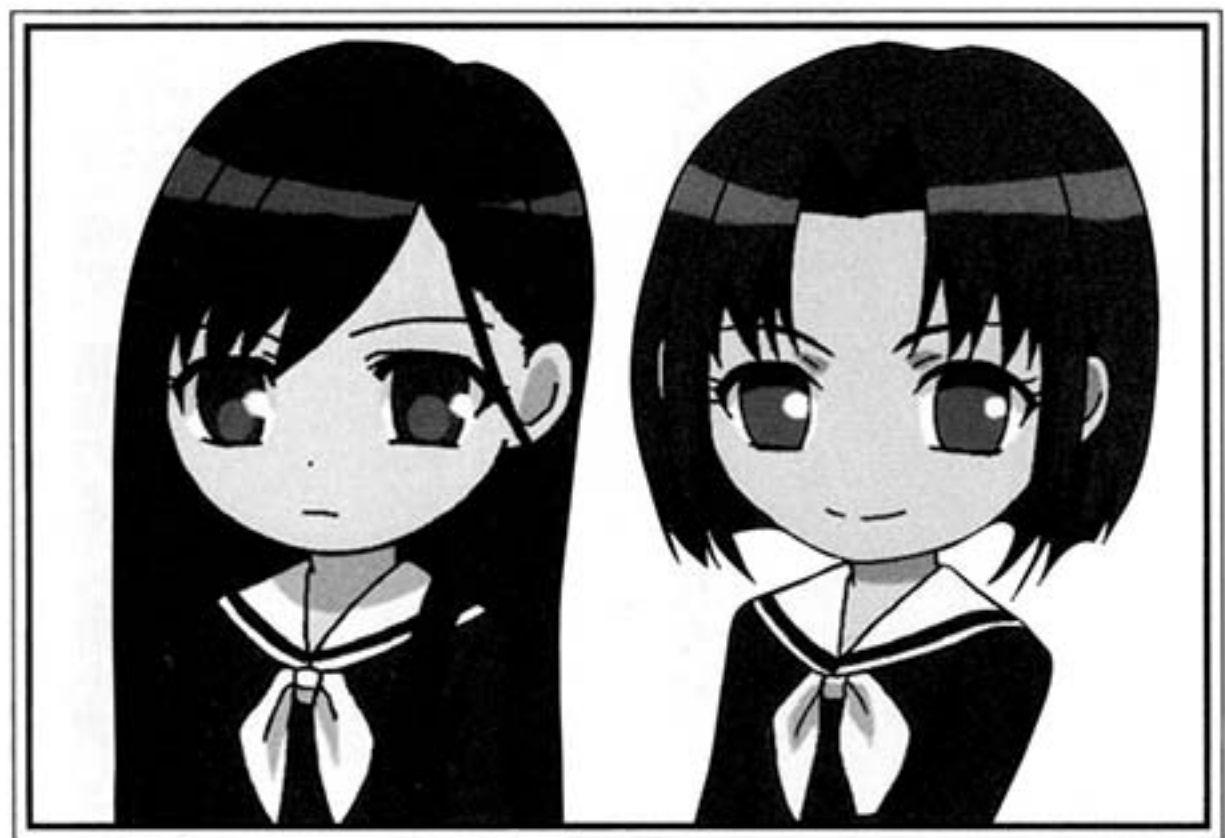


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マリア様がみてる
Answer



Answer

Ogasawara Sachiko looked like a monster.

Walking silently, a large handbag slung over her shoulder, she somehow resembled a model of a monster that was destroying a miniature city for a movie shooting.

She was always angry about something.

She was always struggling against some unseen force.

She was probably more than aware that the thing she was fighting wasn't something that was right in front of her eyes.

Her own existence was difficult for her to manage.

She was struggling, unable to adapt to the world.

As the monster walks through the city, it destroys it.

But the one who's truly being injured might be the monster, who has nowhere to go.

That is the pathos of the monster.

And of Ogasawara Sachiko, a first-year high school student at Lillian Girls' Academy.

"Have you decided, Yōko?" Rosa Chinensis inquired from her position behind Yōko.

".....Have I decided what, Onee-sama?" Yōko responded, not pausing in her task of making tea. Naturally, she didn't turn back to look over her shoulder.

"You're so uncute." Rosa Chinensis laughed. "The way you trailed off before asking, 'Have I decided what?' shows you know exactly what I'm talking about."

"I'm terribly sorry." As she spoke, Yōko poured the Darjeeling from the teapot into cups. The faintly-scented vapor wafted up and enveloped her body.

She still had a lot to learn. She took a deep breath, looking as though she was trying to pull herself together.

"Is this about my taking a petite sœur?"

It was after school, and they were in the Rose Mansion. Yōko carried three cups to the table: one for Rosa Chinensis, one for herself, and one for...

“Pick someone with some sort of easily recognizable feature, Yōko-chan. That’s a request from me.”

Rosa Gigantea, Satō Sei’s onee-sama.

“An easily recognizable feature?”

“A girl who’s really tall, for example, or one who’s big like a sumo wrestler, or one with a froggy voice, or one with frizzy, naturally curly hair.”

“Or Western features?”

“That’s right!” Rosa Gigantea said, swinging her shoulders happily at Yōko’s response.

“Instead of saying her name, you give a description like, ‘It’s that boyish girl,’ and it just clicks right away.”

“Oh, you mean Hasekura Rei.”

The name that fell from Rosa Chinensis’s lips belonged to a new first-year student. One who, with her very short hair and cool features, looked like a bishōnen at first glance. Because Rosa Foetida en bouton, Torii Eriko, seemed to be interested in her, they at least knew what she looked like and that she was in the kendo club.

“That’s just like Eriko-chan. She’s got her eye on a good one.”

“We weren’t the only ones who weren’t consulted, right? Rosa Foetida wasn’t either, was she?”

“Eriko-chan isn’t the sort of person who plays by everyone else’s rules, you know. She told me she and Rosa Foetida will be a little late today because they’re going to go watch the kendo club practice.”

“She’s even bringing her onee-sama along?”

“It’s to put pressure on the second-years in the kendo club. To show them that the Yellow Rose Family already has its eye on Hasekura Rei, it’s pretty common for sempai and kōhai in clubs to pair up as sœurs, you know.”

“Pair... up.....”

Bringing the conversation to a close by saying that the Yellow Rose Family’s petite sœur issue would soon be resolved, Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Gigantea sipped their tea. They made it clear that they envied the Yellow Rose Family in that respect.

It was the beginning of May; the new first-year students hadn’t even been at the high school for a full month yet. So for Yōko, it was not an enjoyable experience to be the target of this sort of barbed comment from the two upperclassman, though she possessed a well of patience. Sei was as guilty as Yōko in terms of not having found any potential sœur candidates yet, but because she always skipped out on the meetings at the Rose Mansion, the end result was that Yōko was the only one who was put in a sticky situation.

“So it’s Yōko-chan’s turn next. Bring us a girl who’s even more interesting than Hasekura Rei, won’t you?”

“Rosa Gigantea, if you have any requests, please address them to your own petite sœur.”

“Sei, huh? I wonder if she can even take a petite sœur. Don’t you get the sense that she has her hands full just with her own problems?”

“You’re too soft on her, as always.”

Rosa Chinensis looked at Rosa Gigantea accusingly. Rosa Gigantea’s indulgence of her petite sœur wasn’t something that had just begun that day.

“You go ahead and try squishing Sei into some set mold. She’ll break into a million pieces. And then who do you think is going to pick up the pieces that have been scattered all over the floor?”

Rosa Gigantea always stuck up for her petite sœur that way, by tossing out that sort of threat.

Yōko had no end of enthusiasm for picking up the pieces, but she didn’t want to see her friend Satō Sei break down. So she ultimately fell prey to Rosa Gigantea’s tactics too. They were both too soft on Sei. She was their joint responsibility.

“For heaven’s sake, why did you pick such a high-maintenance girl as your *sœur*, Rosa Gigantea?”

Rosa Gigantea smiled at Rosa Chinensis’s words.

Because I wanted to put up and admire a nice piece of delicate glasswork.”

Sei decided to become Rosa Gigantea’s *sœur* after Rosa Gigantea told her she liked her features. Which could be taken as an example of the ultimate courtship.

“Though I do appreciate how helpful it would be to have a practical *sœur* like Yōko-chan.”

“By the way, if Sei is a piece of glasswork, what does that make Yōko?”

“A furoshiki.”

“And why is that?”

“It’s useful when you need it, and it doesn’t get in the way. It doesn’t break.”

“That’s perfect! Two zabuton!”

“Rosa Chinensis clapped. It really was perfect. Yōko herself felt that there was no other object that could correspond so perfectly to her personality.

“I have a request for you as Yōko’s *grande sœur*. Put a “high grade” label on her forehead. Not vinyl, but cloth. Like those things that have embroidery or names on them.”

Yōko did appreciate Rosa Chinensis’s modest bit of consideration, but if they laughed at her too much, she wouldn’t be able to enjoy the joke with them. Yōko sighed, a complex expression twisting her features, and her *onee-sama* handed her a notebook, saying, “I forgot about this.”

“What is this?”

“We made up a list of key first-year students. Though we’re not saying you have to pick one from this list or anything. It will be a good reference for you, won’t it?”

“I’ll look it over.”

If they tried to meddle in Sei’s business like this, she’d probably kick up a fuss, Yōko thought, accepting the notebook. Written there were the names and class names of about twenty first-year students, along with basic profile info such as the clubs they belonged to. Hasekura Rei, who hadn’t been checked out by any of the Roses, wasn’t listed there, naturally.

Yōko flipped through the notebook, but just perusing the names without even any pictures of the students’ faces, there was no way she was going to be able to say, “It’s that one!” and pick one just like that.

“It seems it’s rather difficult to practically use this notebook for reference, Onee-sama.”

“Well, I suppose you’re right. You shouldn’t depend too much on it.”

Apparently they made it half as a joke. Or maybe to enjoy seeing Yōko’s reaction to it. They were the sort of people who would go to a lot of trouble to play a joke on someone. Maybe it was their reaction to doing too much studying for college entrance exams.

“Oh.”

Yōko rested her eyes on one page in particular.

“.....The monster.”

“Monster?”

“No, nothing.”

She’d muttered it without thinking, but of course the girl on the list wasn’t really a monster. In fact, in a way, this girl was a school celebrity. Yōko recognized her even without a picture.

“Oh, Ogasawara Sachiko?” Rosa Gigantea said, peering down at the object in Yōko’s hands.

“Why is her page crossed out?”

“We decided that though her name may be impressive, it would be impossible for you to make her your petite sœur. The choice to cross her off the list was unanimous.”

Rosa Chinensis, Rosa Gigantea, and Rosa Foetida had all concurred-- this was their collective opinion.

“You think she’ll be difficult to handle because she’s from a wealthy family?”

Ogasawara Sachiko was the daughter of the CEO of a large company.

“When it comes to kōhai, it doesn’t matter if they come from wealthy families or common ones, they’re still all kōhai. But no matter who you take as your petite sœur, that’s someone you’ll have to face till the end, so it might be inevitable that problems with her personality will pop up that will mark her as easy or difficult to handle. But that will come later, won’t it?”

“So?”

Rosa Chinensis was the next to answer the question of why Ogasawara Sachiko had been struck from the list.

“It’s simple. Ogasawara Sachiko has no free time.”

“You mean she’s busy with lessons?” Yōko spoke the first thing that came to mind.

“You knew?” the two Roses asked, looking a bit surprised.

“I’ve seen her carrying an extra bag to and from school with her a lot of times.”

“A lot of times, huh?” Rosa Chinensis chose to stress that point in particular, but Yōko just continued speaking, affecting not to notice.

“But if we’re talking about being in a school club---”

Hasekura Rei was in the kendo club, and she was probably going to become Eriko’s sœur. And it wasn’t at all out of the ordinary for a young woman to be taking one or two kinds of extracurricular lessons. Yōko couldn’t imagine it could be true that none of the other girls on the list were taking similar lessons.

“Clubs don’t meet every day.”

“She has lessons every day.”

“Rosa Chinensis nodded. “On days when she doesn’t have an extra bag with her, she has some sort of tutor coming to her house, I’ve heard.”

“Rosa Gigantea continued for her. “With a school club, it would be easy enough to coordinate things between that and her work for the Yamayurikai, even if the club met every day. We could only take up a bit of her time at times when she was really busy with club activities, and, in extreme cases, she could go back and forth between things if they were located in the same general area.”

But there was no way they could manage it if she was busy with activities somewhere other than the school. That was why Ogasawara Sachiko was crossed off the list.

“Is that the only reason she was removed from the list?”

“Yes, that’s it. But isn’t that reason one that’s difficult to overcome?” Rosa Chinensis smiled and took a sip of her tea.

“I understand.”

“Yōko shut the notebook.

Then, still not looking up, Rosa Chinensis said, “The objective here would be to get Ogasawara Sachiko to quit her lessons, Yōko.” She said it as casually as though she were speaking about the weather.

“Onee-sama.....”

Yōko couldn’t compare to her onee-sama at all-- Rosa Chinensis, accurately anticipating her petite sœur's needs before she herself even realized them, said, “But those activities take place outside of school. It’s not something a mere sempai should interfere in.”

“Then what should I do?”

“What should you do? Well, first I need to know what sort of situation you want to create here.”

“What sort of situation?”

“Have you decided that you want to make Ogasawara Sachiko your petite sœur?”

Yōko couldn’t answer, either in the affirmative or the negative. However, if she had answered, “No,” she would have been lying.

There was no question that Ogasawara Sachiko interested her, but that didn’t mean that she wanted to take her as her petite sœur right away. If she did take her as her sœur, she’d need a lot of patience. She’d probably be as “high-maintenance” as Satō Sei. Yōko had a feeling that dealing with her as a sœur would be even more difficult than convincing her to quit her lessons.

“It doesn’t matter either way, does it? Stop involving yourself in my business.”

Because Yōko hadn’t answered her question, Rosa Chinensis prompted her, “Yōko, answer the question.”

“.....Yes.”

Yōko understood that even as her thoughts were moving away from Ogasawara Sachiko, her feelings were drawing her closer to her.

During the day, her eyes unconsciously sought out Ogasawara Sachiko’s form.

After school, she’d go to take care of the cleaning and whatnot at the Rose Mansion, then sneak out as though she were going to the bathroom and go walk along the ginkgo-lined path with no particular purpose in mind.

No, there was a purpose to it. Her aim was to see Ogasawara Sachiko.

She always looked beautiful, a strong, determined expression shaping her features. But sometimes it hurt to watch her.

Yōko wondered what it was Ogasawara Sachiko was struggling with, and why it was that she needed to.

Just looking at her from the outside yielded no answers. Yōko wanted to see what was going on inside her, wanted to get a glimpse into Ogasawara Sachiko's heart. Her feelings for her mounted, growing at a rapid rate.

One day, Yōko finally called out to Ogasawara Sachiko.

"Ogasawara Sachiko-san."

It was as though, watching the first-year student who sported the expression of a monster destroying a city, she'd been temporarily possessed and spoken without her own volition.

It happened in front of the statue of the Virgin Mary.

"Yes?"

For a moment, Sachiko turned to look over her shoulder, a surprised expression on her face. Then the moment was over, and she returned Yōko's gaze with eyes imbued with her customary belligerence.

"Is there something you require?" She asked.

"I'd like to speak with you for a few moments. How much time do you have?"

Sachiko looked at her watch.

"I can spare ten minutes."

"That will be fine. Come with me."

Yōko smiled, and set off.

The tree-lined path they were on was inundated with students on their way home from school. There was no harm in their being seen together, but it wasn't a good place to talk.

"Calligraphy?"

A makisu-shaped object was sticking out of Sachiko's cloth bag, and Yōko caught a glimpse of calligraphy brushes within.

"Yes."

Though Yōko hadn't introduced herself, it seemed Sachiko knew who she was. Her understanding didn't seem to extend, however, to knowing the reason behind Yōko's decision to approach her.

“You can relax. I’m not going to ask you to become my sœur,” Yōko said, anticipating Sachiko’s question.

At those words, a complicated expression twisted Sachiko’s features. It might have been that the thought had in fact crossed her mind.

“I’ve heard you’re taking a variety of lessons, so there’s no way I could ask you to come help the Yamayurikai out, now is there?” Yōko said, following up her previous statement. She wanted to make it clear that it wasn’t a question of Sachiko’s temperament being unsuitable.

The two of them entered the university area of Lillian, and sat down at a bench that was in view of a fountain. They didn’t choose the location because of an absence of people-- there were quite a few coming and going-- but because, strangely enough, the absence of high school division uniforms made them less distracting.

Her eyes on the little rainbow formed by the fountain’s spray, Yōko said, “Is there one in particular that’s your favorite?”

“Huh?”

“Of the lessons.”

Sachiko took a bit of time to answer.

“I have never stopped to consider whether or not I like my lessons.”

Her answer was completely unexpected.

Yōko hadn’t been expecting a simple answer like “I like calligraphy” or “I like ballet,” but she’d never expected to hear “I have never stopped to consider it.” If Sachiko’s intention had been to dodge a question posed by an upperclassman she barely knew, she could have said something like “I like all of them,” or “I couldn’t choose one over the others.” And yet, her answer had been “I have never stopped to consider it.”

A chill ran up and down Yōko’s spine.

Sachiko was the sort of person who said what was on her mind, without bothering to dress the ideas up to make them more palatable.

Yōko assaulted Sachiko with more questions, compelled to hear more.

“So you’re not taking the lessons because you enjoy them. Is it out of habit? Or by order of your parents?”

“At my age, my parents would not order me to do so. My father and grandfather chose my teachers, but I am continuing the lessons of my own free will.”

“Even though you don’t like them?”

“I wish to be well-educated and well-accomplished.”

Well-educated and well-accomplished. That phrase was ill-suited for a first-year high school student.

So, as a joke, Yōko asked, “Are you going to have a miai?”

“A miai?No.” Sachiko denied it immediately.

After thinking it over for a few moments, she changed her response.

“I do not know. It may be that I will have one.”

Perhaps something came to mind for Sachiko in that short interval, but Yōko couldn’t ask her about it. They weren’t sœurs, after all. She had, however, found one of the reasons behind the gloom clouding Sachiko’s face. Perhaps daughters of wealthy families had to deal with things that an ordinary girl couldn’t even conceive of.

“So it will be added prestige.”

Yōko didn’t think a beautiful, intelligent, proper young woman from a wealthy family needed any more prestige, but she said what she did to wrap up the conversation, because she’d gotten the sense that she was driving Sachiko into a corner.

However.

“No, nothing of the sort,” Sachiko said. “There is a part of me that is lacking. I wish to fill that absence.”

“So you want to improve yourself.”

“I am dissatisfied with my current self. That is all. I do not wish to deny the last fifteen years of my life-- I merely think that I am in search of something.”

“I hope you find whatever it is you’re looking for.”

Yōko stood up.

“It’s been ten minutes.”

That was a close call. If things had progressed a bit further, she would have given Sachiko her rosary. She’d realized that she wanted to help Sachiko in her search.

“So what was it that you required of me?” Standing, Sachiko put her bag up on her shoulder and then grabbed her satchel.

“I told you, didn’t I? I wanted to speak with you.”

“Is that so?”

Yōko thought she saw a flicker of a smile on Sachiko’s features, but it might have just been her imagination.

“Gokigenyou.”

“Gokigenyou.”

Exchanging the standard Lillian greeting, they parted ways in front of the fountain.

On her way back to the Rose Mansion, Yōko ran into Sei on the tree-lined path.

“Hunh. So it’s true you have your eye on Ogasawara Sachiko.”

Sei was getting ready to go home-- apparently she was going to skip today’s meeting, as usual.

“Apparently. It’s quite likely.”

“Apparently?” Sei echoed, then gave a sarcastic laugh.

“That’s perfect-- a first-year student who’ll probably need plenty of taking care of is a great match for the girl who likes to take care of people.”

“Don’t describe me so simply. It’s not like I want to take care of everyone.”

“Oh, of course. Please excuse me.”

Yōko just wanted to form connections with the people who happened to be on her mind all the time. If the rest of the world happened to view those people as high-maintenance, well then.

“Did you ask her to be your sœur?”

“No, for various reasons. And Onee-sama told me not to get too involved with her. She’s tied my hands.”

“Tied your hands? You’re the sort of person who does things when it comes down to it, obstacles be damned, aren’t you?”

Yōko laughed. She was well aware of that fact.

“Anyway, aren’t you being manipulated by Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Gigantea?”

“Manipulated? By Onee-sama and Rosa Gigantea?”

Sei’s suggestion was completely unthinkable.

“It was Onee-sama and Rosa Gigantea who pointed out the biggest obstacle to my making Ogasawara Sachiko my sœur.”

“I don’t know anything about that, but I do know that you don’t like to bother with minor hurdles.”

Sei pointed her index finger at Yōko’s face, circling around with it as though she were trying to catch a mosquito.

“Hurdles.....”

There was only one name crossed off the list of first-year students: Ogasawara Sachiko.

They could have removed the page from the notebook entirely, but instead they crossed it out with a simple diagonal line.

“You mean they set me up?”

“Who knows?”

If they had, then had her onee-sama given her the task of resolving the situation? To take care of things herself if she wanted to make Ogasawara Sachiko her sœur?

But what would be the best way to handle it? She wasn’t allowed to persuade Sachiko to give up her lessons.

“Well, things will be better for me if you get a sœur. You’d better give it your all!”

“Sei!”

Though they were both boutons, Sei had firmly shelved the issue of her own sœur.

“Tomorrow is the welcoming ceremony for the new students!” Yōko called to Sei’s retreating back.

“I’ll be there!” Sei answered, not bothering to turn back. “I promised Onee-sama.”

Oh. So that was it.

It was things like this that made people consider Yōko the sort of person who liked taking care of others.

The Yamayurikai-led welcoming ceremony was held every year in mid-March, on the afternoon of the day the Maria Festival was held.

Each year at the ceremony, the new first-year high school students would assemble in the chapel and receive a medallion as proof of their new inclusion as students of Lillian High School, and there would be some sort of simple performance.

The ceremony also likely served to give the new students the opportunity to learn what the Roses looked like.

“Onee-sama, I might never take a sœur.”

It was right before the ceremony was set to begin. Yōko had gone to Rosa Chinensis’s side to help with the preparations; medallions lay in a basket that had been readied for the occasion. The three Roses would divide up the labor, making sure a medallion was placed around the neck of each and every new student.

“Oh, my. That *is* a problem.” The way she said it, it was apparent Yōko’s proclamation hadn’t really troubled her at all. She probably hadn’t taken her seriously.

“It will cause problems for you, Onee-sama.”

“That’s fine. You’re the one who’s going to suffer over it once I’m gone, now aren’t you? I’ll... Pretty much only be losing a pack of strawberry milk.”

“Huh?”

“I made a bet with Rosa Foetida over whose *sœur* would find a petite *sœur* first.”

“So you bet strawberry milk?”

“Yes, that’s why I said that’s what I would lose.” Rosa Chinensis’s words gradually permeated into Yōko’s mind.

Once again, Yōko thought to herself that she’d probably never be able to compare to her onee-sama.

“I see. You really do want Ogasawara Sachiko,” Rosa Chinensis muttered, just as Rosa Foetida’s magnified voice resounded through the church: “To all our new students, congratulations on your entrance into Lillian Girls’ Academy.” The ceremony was beginning.

Holding the basket, Yōko stood next to Rosa Chinensis.

The students in Plum Group, Wisteria Group, and Chrysanthemum Group were called first; they stood up from their seats.

“May the Virgin Mary’s protection be with you.” Yōko’s onee-sama hung a medallion around the neck of girl after girl, working skillfully and evenly.

“May the Virgin Mary’s protection be with you.”

When the first three classes had been done without incident, Peach Group, Pine Group, and Camellia Group were called. Looking at Pine Group, Yōko thought to herself, *But there’s nothing I can do about it.*

Even in the giant mass of students, Yōko only had eyes for Ogasawara Sachiko. In order to justify the special regard Yōko had for Sachiko, she needed to make her her *sœur*-- she needed to set Sachiko apart from everyone else. If she couldn’t take Sachiko as her *sœur*, then the very idea of Yōko having a *sœur* would be a mistake.

Sachiko's student ID number was early on the list, and so she was there standing before them in no time at all.

"May the Virgin Mary's protection be with you."

Though she was supposed to step aside after receiving her medallion to make room for the next person to come forward, Sachiko completely disregarded the system and stepped up to stand in front of Yōko instead.

"Rosa Chinensis en Bouton."

"Huh!?" Yōko was taken by surprise at Sachiko's unexpected actions. Sachiko smiled, as though she found the sight of a flustered Yōko amusing.

It was a radiant smile. Yōko never knew Sachiko had such a lovely smile.

"I have withdrawn from all of my lessons," Sachiko said, with smiling eyes that nevertheless reflected the formidable strength of her will. She bowed, then turned around and went back to her seat.

"Looks like I'm going to get some free strawberry milk," Rosa Chinensis murmured, so quietly that Yōko was the only one to hear.

Oh, that's right.

Yōko nodded.

Sachiko had given her answer. Now it was Yōko's turn to respond.